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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Don't Forget the Border

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IMMIGRATION is a tough issue and the Senate deserves our thanks for moving a bill forward this year. But as with all things related to immigration, the devil is in the details. As a border state governor with a close-up view of how immigration policy works on the ground, I have seen how easily plans can fall apart, or lose the support they need from Washington.

For example, even as the Senate debates its bill, the Bush administration is reducing by nearly half the number of National Guard members assigned to support the Border Patrol in the Southwest. Illegal immigration is a problem not yet solved, and the need for Border Patrol agents has not diminished. In light of the Guard reduction, it is imperative that we have more Border Patrol agents and fund their sustained presence.

The reduction in border security comes at an odd time, given that the compromise legislation specifies that all its measures to enhance border security — chiefly, putting up hundreds of miles of more fence along the border and doubling the number of Border Patrol agents — be in place before any visas are issued to temporary workers. I strongly favor enhanced border security, but I am concerned about delaying a temporary worker program until those security measures are instituted. The Department of Homeland Security has already demonstrated that it takes a long time to hire agents and to award contracts for fencing. A temporary worker program should not be burdened with this unnecessary delay.

The temporary worker program in the Senate legislation, however, needs improvement. The proposed notion that temporary workers stay

here for two years, return home for a year, then repeat that strange cycle two more times makes no sense. No employer can afford this schedule — hiring and training, only to have a worker who soon will leave. It will only encourage employers and workers to find new ways to break the rules.

Equally troubling is the so-called “touchback” provision aimed at the estimated 12 million people already here illegally. The compromise requires “heads of household” to return to their country of origin to apply for permanent resident status, with their re-entry guaranteed. This would create an exponential increase in work for the State Department, which can barely handle the load it carries now. Without more resources and a streamlined system, the touchback idea won’t work.

These and other issues should be addressed in the Senate debate. Lawmakers should not forget that immigration reform must be truly comprehensive. The country has waited too long to accept anything less.

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